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SUBJECT: TAKING STOCK OF EGYPT'S ELECTIONS

Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) After the relatively positive presidential elections, Egypt's parliamentary elections were marred by a low turnout, vote-rigging, and violence -- but nonetheless signify a new stage in the country's political transition. Gains by Islamists and the role played by civil society testify to a significant expansion of political space. Some conclusions:

--President Mubarak is managing political reform and so far allowing only slow, controlled change.

--After exerting considerable influence in the presidential elections, Gamal Mubarak and the NDP reformers appear diminished;

--The traditional opposition has been sidelined for now.

--The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is resurgent, but given the low turnout, neither it nor the NDP can claim a true mandate.

--Civil society, in the form of organized, idealistic domestic monitors, has asserted itself.

Following is our assessment of Egypt's recent election season. End summary.

Change is Happening but Mubarak in Driver's Seat

2. (C) Three rounds of parliamentary elections and Egypt's first-ever competitive presidential election clearly show that Egypt has reached an important juncture in a process of political transformation that began several years ago. The parliamentary elections saw violence and clumsy efforts to rig the process, evidently limited to carefully targetted locales. They were also hampered by the Government refusal to reopen voter registration (ensuring a low turnout). The gains by MB candidates (running as independents), the widespread presence of domestic monitors from civil society, and the relatively objective media coverage nonetheless reflect how far Egypt has come in the last year. However, the secular, modernist opposition has been sidelined, for now. Likewise, key reform-oriented members of the ruling NDP, who had aligned themselves with Gamal Mubarak, were mainly excluded from the party's candidate slate and now question their role in the party.

3. (C) The NDP appears in a potentially healthy internal simmer. Reverting to old style tactics, it did only slightly better in these elections than they had in the 2000 elections (which had been considered a "wake up call" for the NDP because of its poor showing), as many of their candidates lost to NDP "renegade" independents or MBs running as independents. The MB's success against all others (in the races they chose to compete) is the clearest indicator of progress in democratic processes scarcely imaginable even a year ago. Although the MB has taken advantage of the democratic openings that the GOE, however reluctantly, has created, many observers remain skeptical about their commitment to real democracy.

The New Parliament

4. (C) Egypt's next parliament will be populated by a majority of veteran ruling party members, few of whom are distinguished by their commitment to genuine reform, and a freshly energized Islamist minority. The NDP's majority will leave it in firm control of the legislative process. However, the MB, which has already won 75 seats (up from 16 in the outgoing parliament, will have a pronounced influence on the tone and tenor of debate.

5. (C) The secular opposition parties will play little or no role in the new parliament: The Wafd, Egypt's "premier"

opposition party, continued its steep descent into irrelevance, hobbled by inept and superannuated leadership. At best, the Wafd's spectacular humiliation in the 2005 elections could prompt a long overdue house cleaning. Several other parties fit the same pattern. In a different vein, the Ghad, the year-old secular modernist party, was systematically destroyed by internal factionalism exacerbated by a raft of government tactics, principally the politically-driven prosecution of its leader Ayman Nour (who nonetheless placed second to Mubarak, with 700,000 votes in the September presidential race).

Elections Don't Reflect Popular Choice

16. (C) The MB's gains do not mean that a substantial majority of Egyptians support the MB and its aim to further Islamicize governance and society. Egyptian voters were essentially given two choices: On the one hand was a ruling party that despite considerable efforts to reform since 2000 (mainly led by Gamal) appeared bereft of any discernable ideology and was saddled both with a well-earned reputation for corruption and a poor record of delivering jobs and services to the citizenry. On the other hand was a well-organized political-religious movement with no record of governance to defend and an ability to appeal to the deeply held spiritual values of an alienated citizenry.

17. (C) Further, the MB chose to run candidates in only 170 of the 444 races. Although its success rate so far is better than 50 percent, it also chose to compete in races where its chances were best and used its considerable powers of organization to great effect in those races. As Supreme Guide Mahdi Akef himself said in an interview in Al-Araby on November 27, the MB might have the backing of only 25 percent of the Egyptian electorate. Domestic monitors have reported much lower turnout in many races, particularly in those where thugs scared voters from the polls or police blockaded access. Some estimate that only 5 percent of the 30 percent of eligible voters who are registered bothered to vote.

18. (C) Particularly in this context, the MB's parliamentary gains seem inevitable, and likely reflect no broad popular mandate for any party. Many Egyptian voters we spoke with flatly told us that they voted for the MB simply to send the NDP a message.

Civil Society Empowered

19. (C) Civil society groups who took on domestic monitoring have defined an important place for themselves on Egypt's political stage. While there were considerable problems with access, and isolated incidents of violence against monitors, the concept of domestic monitoring is now an accepted part of the political landscape and reflects the increasing confidence and institutional strength of activist NGOs. Many of the volunteers are young and NGO contacts are excited at the new level of interest in participatory democracy that represents a desire to make government work, rather than tear things down--as had been the case in earlier spurts of activism.

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